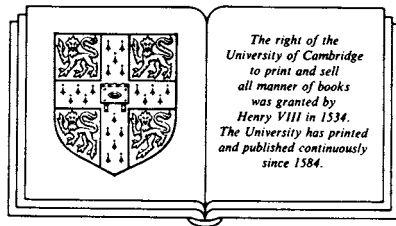


FEMINISM AND DEMOCRACY

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE AND
REFORM POLITICS IN BRITAIN
1900–1918

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INTRODUCTION

It has become a truism to say that, in conventional scholarship, women have been 'hidden from history'¹ and are only now 'becoming visible'.² It might be argued that the British women's suffragists are the exception which proves this rule. The activities of some of the movement's leading figures, notably the Pankhurst family, were well publicized at the time, and have since assumed an almost mythical standing. Their campaigning has been recorded in numerous memoirs,³ together with more scholarly studies⁴ and biographies,⁵ and in a television series. Feminist scholarship itself exhibits a certain ambivalence in regard to the history of the suffrage movement. It has been argued that suffragists have received a disproportionate share of historians' attention, to the neglect of other more pressing issues in women's history.⁶ Special urgency has been attached to the task of researching 'the social history of the ordinary, everyday lives of women'⁷ and 'the existential experience of being female'.⁸ Behind such arguments lie assumptions concerning the remoteness of 'politics' from 'everyday life' and the atypicality of politically active women. By their visibility and articulateness suffragists are taken to be exceptional and extraordinary beings among their sex. There is the contention, too, that the very enterprise of suffrage history mistakenly assumes the causal centrality of politics to processes of social change affecting women.⁹

From such standpoints this study might appear doubly misconceived. To begin with, it provides an account of the suffrage movement in Britain between 1900 and 1918, formal participation in which was, indeed, not a typical pursuit among women. Further, it concentrates on two aspects of the political dimensions of that movement: first, in its analysis of the internal debates and struggles concerning the strategies and tactics to be developed in the campaign for votes for women; and secondly in its focus on the relations between labour-movement women and middle-class, Liberal feminists, between rank-and-file provincial suffrage societies and the national leadership in London, and between feminist and party politics, especially labour politics, between 1900 and 1918. For whereas middle-class feminists had dominated women's suffrage

organisations in the late nineteenth century, working-class women, and especially those organised within the labour movement, were becoming an increasingly significant presence among rank-and-file suffragists by the early years of this century. As a consequence, this study will argue, issues of class as well as sex equality become central to the politics of the movement.

To undertake such a study as this does not imply a rejection of the value of what has been termed the 'new women's history'.¹⁰ Recent explorations of 'female worlds' and 'women's culture', with their emphasis on gender roles, the female life cycle, and female sexuality, have undoubtedly increased our understanding of nineteenth-century women's lives,¹¹ and in ways which provide insights, too, into the history of women's political activity in this period.¹² But it does assert the equal validity of what has been characterised by one self-professed 'new women's historian' as 'traditional women's history', with its emphasis on organisations and social movements.¹³ In so doing, it necessarily disputes the tenability of some of the reservations concerning 'traditional women's history' raised on behalf of the 'new women's history'. The concept of 'the average woman' lies behind much of this present unease, for it gives rise to the question: If suffragists were not 'average' or 'typical' women, how useful is it to study their activities? Such a concern is based on the assumption that there is a generality to women's experience from which some women depart and that the 'quintessential female experiences' are ones quite divorced from the world of politics.¹⁴

The difficulty with such a proposition – at least as a critique of suffrage history – is the impossibility of defining such a typicality or generality for British women at the turn of this century in such a way that suffragists are necessarily excluded by virtue of being suffragists. Though such women were exceptional in their political activism, this is not sufficient ground to assume that they thereby differed absolutely from 'the average woman', or that their political life was something quite divorced from and unrelated to the rest of their existence. Whereas the majority of women had no formal association with the suffrage movement, neither were the majority of suffragists members of some elite caste that had abdicated 'women's estate' for membership of something quite other. Though individuals may be atypical in any number of ways, their lives may nonetheless provide the historian with insights into some more generalised experience. This has been most amply demonstrated in the first thoroughgoing study of provincial, working-class suffragism, Jill Liddington and Jill Norris's *One Hand Tied behind Us*, and in Doris Nield Chew's collection of her mother Ada's writings, and an account of her life as a working-class organiser for the suffrage movement, *The Life and Writings of a Working Woman*.¹⁵ Such studies offer a new perspective on the suffrage movement at the same time as they rescue the rank-and-file suffragist from what E. P. Thompson once termed 'the enormous con-

descension of posterity'.¹⁶ They also suggest how research on the suffrage movement may be combined with attempts to recover the everyday experience of ordinary women.

Nor need the undertaking of political history, of itself, imply assumptions on the part of the historian concerning the causal centrality of politics to processes of social change. To write suffrage history is to assert only that political activity may form as significant a part of 'the existential reality' of women as, say, sexual relations or mothering. It is also to recognise the cultural, symbolic significance of the vote in our society, a significance which requires the historian to look beyond its potential, or otherwise, for effecting change. Campaigning for women's enfranchisement, I will argue, involved suffragists in an active attempt to redefine not only female roles but political life. It was the well-reasoned response of a wide variety of women to the connections they perceived between the problems and concerns of their everyday lives and the broader social and political issues of their society. Further, as Joan Wallach Scott has argued recently:

To ignore politics in the recovery of the female subject is to accept the reality of public/private distinctions and the separate or distinctive qualities of women's character and experience. It misses the chance not only to challenge the accuracy of binary distinctions between men and women in the past and present, but to expose the very political nature of a history written in those terms.¹⁷

In all these respects much of the critical assessment of 'traditional women's history' is founded on significantly impoverished understandings of the historical meaning of the campaigns for women's enfranchisement.¹⁸ It also seriously underestimates the potential of the history of women's political activity for revising existing understandings of particular periods or issues. The votes-for-women campaigns well illustrate this last point, for they played a notable part in the realignment of British party politics which was occurring in the period preceding the First World War. The examination of the politics of the women's suffrage movement that follows aims to bring this aspect of the campaigns more clearly into focus, and to demonstrate once more how historians' blindness to women may render their accounts inadequate. For, ironically, the relation between the women's suffrage campaigns and the party-political struggles of the period has previously received little attention.¹⁹ P. F. Clarke's work *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* has suggested the importance of the women's-suffrage issue for the fate of British Liberalism.²⁰ David Morgan's study *Suffragists and Liberals* supports this contention, and traces the twists and turns of parliamentary and Liberal government consideration of the question.²¹ But the women's suffragists themselves make only brief appearances in Morgan's work, and are almost invisible in Clarke's. Women's suffrage was also a repeatedly discussed issue at early Labour Party conferences, and women's suffragists

were a presence in local labour-movement politics in the first decades of the twentieth century. But again they remain unseen in Ross McKibbin's *The Evolution of the Labour Party*.²² Jill Liddington and Jill Norris's study of working-class suffragists reveals aspects of the interrelation of feminist and labour politics but necessarily only in one locality. The implications of such an alliance for feminist politics, for party politics, and for the eventual success of the votes-for-women campaigns have not previously been explored.

That project, undertaken here, requires a modification of the existing historical convention which emphasises a division of the British suffrage movement into two distinct wings, the 'militants', whose best-known organisation was the Women's Social and Political Union, and the lesser-known 'constitutionalists', most of whom were organised within the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.²³ These organisations' differences are generally taken to centre on the question of the use of violence in demonstrations. That is to say, a mode of campaigning, a style of agitation, is held to be the critical issue among British suffragists. Yet if 'militancy' involved simply a preparedness to resort to extreme forms of violence, few 'militants' were 'militant' and then only from 1912 onwards. The following analysis will argue that an equally fundamental question for early-twentieth-century feminists was the issue of political strategy. Once this dimension to the constitutional/militant division is acknowledged the analytical imprecision of the two terms becomes even more evident. If, as will be argued, militancy connoted among suffragists a willingness to take the issue onto the streets, or if it sometimes indicated labour and socialist affiliations, then, it will be shown, many 'constitutionalists' were also 'militant'. The most consistent sense in which the two terms might be used would be to indicate membership of particular organisations. But even this usage is complicated by the fact that many belonged to both militant and constitutionalist societies simultaneously, suggesting that, for a certain period at least, many suffragists did not themselves view the two approaches to campaigning as either mutually exclusive or at odds with one another. The present historiographic tradition rests largely on an uncritical application of this terminology, and offers in consequence an interpretation of the British suffrage movement that does not mirror adequately its full complexity. The distinction militant/constitutional is not only difficult to apply in any consistent way, but it also tends to obscure those currents within the suffrage movement which cut across it.

The term 'radical' carries similar problems when applied to women's suffragists. Sometimes it is used to characterise the militant wing and reinforce its distinctiveness from the older societies.²⁴ More recently it has been used to identify the movement among working-class women in the textile towns of Lancashire.²⁵ In either case the nature of the radicalism remains ill defined and where it is defined appears to hinge on

labour-movement affiliations. In this sense it cannot be restricted either to militant or working-class suffragists if it is to be used at all consistently. There are, too, other very different candidates for the appellation 'radical suffragists'. The separatists among the militants, for instance, and the sexual libertarians around *The Freewoman* offered more fundamental challenges to the existing order of male-female relations, and Sylvia Pankhurst and other dissident militants became involved in organising far more radical challenges to the political order of the day. In sum, the complexity and variety of the cross-currents within the suffrage movement are not given recognition within our current frameworks, nor can they be adequately represented simply in terms of membership of one or other wing or organisation.

This study will argue that a significant aspect of these cross-currents was the conflicts of loyalty experienced by women's suffragists campaigning for sexual equality in the very period when working-class movements began to organise for the independent representation of their interests in parliament. Most suffragists brought to their campaigning pre-existing class and party loyalties and, in the party-political context of the day, the progressives among them found these frequently cutting across their loyalty to the cause of their sex. The Liberal Party, while embarking on an extensive programme of social reform, was seriously divided on the issue of votes for women, and was led from 1908 by one of its most emphatic antisuffragists, Herbert Asquith. The Labour Party was engaged in building for the first time a united and effective presence in the House of Commons and thus in a challenge to the Liberal Party as the party of reform or the representative of working-class interests. Its attitude to women's enfranchisement between 1905 and 1912 was at best ambiguous, and many within its ranks were openly hostile to equal votes for women under the existing franchise laws. Many of the tensions, conflicts, and drives among women's suffragists can only be understood against this parliamentary party-political background to their campaigning.

One particular issue was to be a recurrent source of discord and debate within all sections of the suffrage movement. This was the question of whether, and if so how, to relate the demand for *equal votes for women* to that for a fully independent Labour Party in the House of Commons and the associated call for *adult suffrage*.²⁶ Both militants and constitutionalists were to be found, at various times, working for an alliance between the two demands. Margaret Llewelyn Davies, a leader of the working-class organisation the Women's Cooperative Guild, coined the term 'democratic suffragist' to designate and rally this body of opinion.²⁷ Identifying such a democratic-suffragist current within the different factions and organisations of the movement, and its varying fortunes within them, is one of the principal objects of this study. The aim is not only to recover aspects of suffrage history that have been lost to view or largely

ignored but also to suggest a new perspective on some of its better-known aspects.

Democratic suffragists covered a broad spectrum of political affiliation from 'progressive' liberalism²⁸ to revolutionary and 'rebel' socialism.²⁹ Largely as a consequence of this they did not form an organised, united faction within the movement until the First World War. Even then they worked through a number of organisations, and their unity was transitory. No doubt this is part of the reason why they have been so difficult to 'see', for their one shared characteristic was a desire to secure women's suffrage as part of a more general democratisation of British society. A feminist-labour alliance seemed to the majority of democratic suffragists the best strategy by which to achieve such a goal. They became an increasingly influential presence in both wings of the movement despite their lack of organisational cohesiveness or even of mutual acknowledgement, and the politics of the suffrage movement may only fully be understood once their presence is recognised.

The work of democratic suffragists within the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was to prove especially fruitful and provides the core of the research presented here. A large part of this study will draw extensively on a previously little-used collection of papers left by the democratic suffragist Catherine Marshall.³⁰ Catherine Marshall was at the centre of suffrage politics from 1911, when she began to act as parliamentary secretary for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. In the following year she was one of those who negotiated with the Labour Party leadership on the implementation of her organisation's new electoral policy. This resulted in the establishment of an Election Fighting Fund for the support of Labour parliamentary candidates. As Election Fighting Fund secretary, Catherine Marshall was to manage the day-to-day activities of constitutional suffragists on behalf of the Labour Party. She was, as a consequence, in frequent correspondence with numerous suffrage-movement organisers in the provinces. Through letters left among her papers, the voice of many rank-and-file suffragists, both middle-class and working-class, may be heard again. The collection offers one of the clearest windows on suffrage-movement politics at present available to the historian.

It was the successful realisation of democratic-suffragist strategy in feminist-labour alliances such as this which ensured the eventual granting of the vote to women, not militancy as the leaders of the Women's Social and Political Union were afterwards to claim. Recognition for their part in this achievement belongs to democratic suffragists in every section of the movement, not to militants or constitutionalists as such. Neither dogged parliamentary lobbying nor violent demonstration in itself secured success. Political vision and political acumen were needed, and both were provided in large part by the democratic suffragists. Their goal was to ally their cause with more generalised movements for radical

social change, and to give expression to their conviction that women's subordination was enmeshed with other structures of social inequality. It was in this way that they were able to forge an alliance with the new force in radical politics in this period, the Labour Party. The demand for votes for women was transformed into a mass social movement, and for the first time working-class women were involved in suffrage activity in significant numbers. Democratic suffragism was able to speak to their discontents both as women and as members of the working class.

Such a conception of suffrage campaigning both drew upon, and helped to maintain to a significant degree, the considerable sense of sexual solidarity among women from all classes which characterised the ethos of the suffrage movement in Britain. The first chapter in this study will explore the ideological roots of this ethos and its articulation through suffragist polemic. The ideas of British suffragists have only recently begun to receive any detailed attention.³¹ It will be argued here that there was a marked degree of ideological homogeneity among suffrage supporters with otherwise varying class and party-political outlooks. This lay in a common understanding of women as a quite distinct subspecies to men and one with skills, attributes, and forms of knowledge particularly relevant to the pursuit of social reform. From such a perspective, votes for women could be viewed as an integral, indeed essential, part of progressive politics. It was in this sense that suffragists claimed theirs as 'the common cause'. Such a conviction in turn served to sustain day-to-day relationships between militant and constitutionalist, between middle-class and working-class, and between Liberal and Labour suffragists.³²

Suffragist analysis of women's subjection further fostered a sense of sexual solidarity in suggesting that all women were joined in membership of a sex class: Whatever their economic position, all women were the victims of the existing exploitative organisation of sexuality in favour of male interests. But the idea of a sex class carried within it an implicit analogy with socialist understandings of inequality that focused on concepts of class derived from economic relationships. Paradoxically, then, this aspect of suffragist ideology served also to highlight the issue which was to be the most divisive for British suffragists – whether or not to recognise class as well as sexual inequality in the campaign for votes for women. The significance of the democratic-suffragist current lay in its unification of these potentially divisive concerns. This was achieved by arguing for a commitment from both the suffrage and labour movements to a conception of political democracy that took account of each form of inequality. It asked Labour supporters to acknowledge that the disenfranchisement of middle-class women by virtue of their sex was as unjust as that of working-class men by virtue of their lack of property. It asked middle-class Liberal women to acknowledge that social justice required the independent representation of working-class interests in

parliament as much as sexual equality in the franchise laws. The ethos of the suffrage movement helped make the democratic-suffragist strategy an effective possibility. But it also rendered it the most compelling necessity. For out of this ethos also grew the sex-war outlook adopted by some among the leadership of the Women's Social and Political Union during the later stages of the campaigns, an outlook which threatened the whole suffrage cause with the disintegration and marginalisation that were eventually to befall that organisation.

The second chapter looks more closely at the nature of the constitutional-militant division and argues that this did not represent rigid or static characteristics. The content of both militancy and constitutionalism changed in significant ways over time, and only gradually did the two wings come to be at complete odds with each other. The third chapter looks at the emergence of the democratic-suffragist current in the first few years of the twentieth century, and at some early efforts by democratic suffragists to secure a greater degree of cooperation between the feminist and labour movements. These first three chapters, then, are largely discursive and aim to provide a context for the narrative which follows in the final four. The latter are concerned with the establishment of an electoral alliance between the Labour Party and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies under the guidance of democratic suffragists in the two years or so before the outbreak of war, and with the impact of war upon both the suffrage movement and the final enfranchisement of women in 1918.